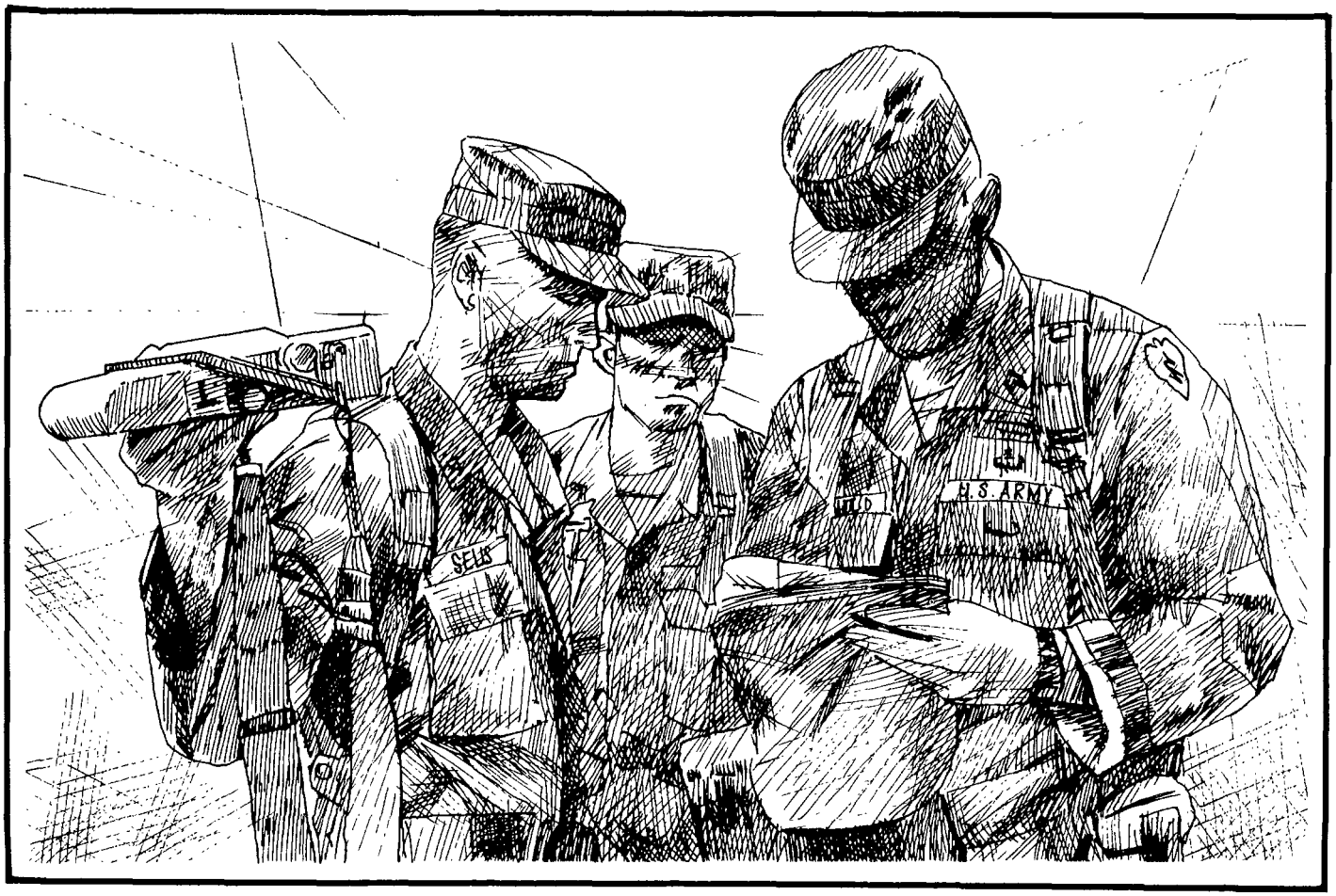

A TASK FORCE COMMANDER'S
PERSONAL PREPARATION FOR THE NTC

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After serving as an observer-controller (OC) at the National Training Center (NTC) for more than a year, I came to the conclusion that many task force commanders suffer from the same deficiencies in the way they have prepared themselves for their units' rotations.

One of my duties as an OC was to follow the task force commander during a mission and observe and report on his actions to the senior team OC. In this process, I had an opportunity to monitor the actions of many commanders and see how they interacted with their staffs and subordinate commanders. The problems I observed seem to apply equally to commanders of light infantry, mechanized infantry, and armor units.

Battalion commanders spend a great deal of time, energy, and resources in preparing their units for rotations at the NTC, as they should: The NTC offers a battle focus for home-station training at a time when the Army's missions have become contingency based, and the Army recognizes that training at any one of the combat training centers is a battalion's premier event. The assumption is that if a unit can do well at the NTC it will also do well against any likely opponent. But the cost is high—in terms of both training dollars and the staff work involved in deploying a unit, drawing equipment, and redeploying. As an NTC rotation looms nearer, preparations for it determine most of a unit's training tasks.

Unfortunately, battalion commanders do not seem to devote the same amount of energy to preparing themselves for coming rotations. As a result, they may not think through and practice their own roles in interacting with their units. And actions that have not been thoroughly practiced at home station will not run smoothly when they are needed during the first battle at the NTC. Even more regrettable, improving one's own performance takes little effort in comparison to that expended in preparing the unit as a whole.

On the basis of the deficiencies I observed, I offer the following recommendations that should help a task force commander prepare himself for an upcoming NTC rotation:

Gain a more detailed knowledge of doctrine. Although most commanders know doctrine well enough to discuss it intelligently at the post simulation center, this level of knowledge is not enough when they are tired and faced with time constraints; this is when they need specifics, not concepts. Adding to the problem, our doctrine itself is vague and contradictory in some areas; different but equally valid manuals and references may provide significantly different information.

This is not to imply that much of our task force level doctrine is not worth using. In fact, it works quite well at the NTC. When the OCs look at cause and effect in developing feedback for the training unit, the first step is to study the unit's plan and actions to see if the doctrine was correctly applied. More often than not when something goes wrong, it can be established that the proper application of doctrine would have prevented the problem. (Although a non-doctrinal approach to a mission is not always wrong, it should be a calculated step, not an act of ignorance.) In other cases, the problem with a mission can be traced back to a failure to understand effective techniques for applying the doctrine. The units may know the principles of direct fire control, for example, but may be lacking in effective techniques for implementing a complex fire control plan for a task force equipped with Abrams tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles.

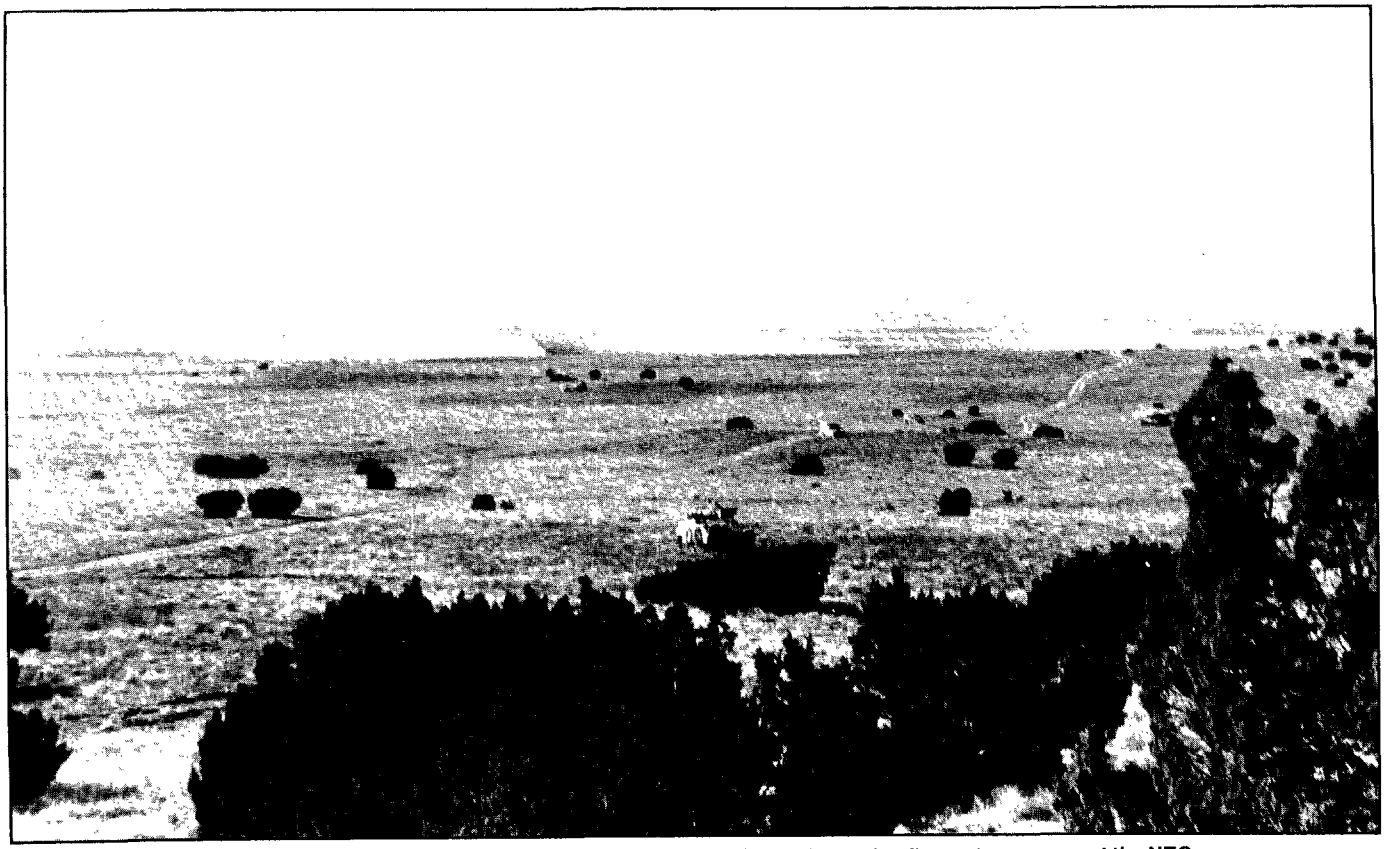
A commander can work to avoid this misapplication of doctrine by taking two relatively simple steps:

The first step is to review the applicable doctrinal literature. Field Manual (FM) 7-20, *The Infantry Battalion*; FM 71-2, *The Tank and Mechanized Infantry Battalion Task Force*; or FM 17-95, *Cavalry Operations*; and the associated mission training plans (MTPs), all offer workable doctrine. The MTPs in particular are excellent for understanding the doctrinal approach to accomplishing a mission. FM 71-123, *Tactics and Techniques for Combined Arms Heavy Forces: Armored Brigade, Battalion/Task Force, and Company Team,* provides good advice on effective techniques and procedures. (I am not suggesting that the commander just memorize doctrine; the information is far too perishable. He needs to understand the principles and intent of the doctrine.)

The second step is to have "cheater cards" prepared for use in training at home station as well as at the NTC. These cards should be a staff effort, with the executive officer (XO) leading and the other staff members contributing. Cards should be prepared for each of the missions on the commander's mission essential task list (METL). The cards are best organized by battlefield operating system (intelligence, maneuver, fire support, air defense, mobility and survivability, logistics, and command and control).

The following are some key items of information for the cards:

- Organization of the force. (Security, breach, and assault forces.)
- Missions of sub-elements of the force. (What is expected



A commander must fully understand doctrine if he is to effectively employ fire and maneuver at the NTC.

of an advanced guard?)

- Control measures normally used. (What are the control measures normally used for a night attack?)
- Relevant doctrinal principles (suppression, obscuration, security, and reduction for breach operations).
- Techniques for applying the doctrine. (How are target reference points marked?)

The information required for a specific mission—defense in sector, for instance—will fit on both sides of a 5'' x 8'' index card. The XO and the S-3 should each have a duplicate set of the cards. If the cards are properly developed and used, developing a plan under stress will be much simpler.

Give the staff clear and complete planning guidance. Commanders regularly provide confusing and disjointed planning guidance that does not address significant task force elements. Worse yet, they may provide the guidance in increments, which makes planning a tedious and potentially unproductive process for the staff. The tendency in such cases is to focus on one or two key points that come readily to mind while omitting other important elements. As a result, staff time is wasted; some members of the staff are either not working at all or working in the wrong direction.

A commander needs a systematic approach to providing planning guidance. I recommend that he structure his guidance using the battlefield operating systems plus nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC). This approach ensures that all elements of the task force will be considered. Here again, a set of cards is useful. The cards should be developed for specific types of missions, but at least for offense and defense. Each member of the battle staff should participate in developing them. The air defense officer, for instance, can make cards showing the minimum essential guidance he needs from the commander to plan air defense during a deliberate attack.

The process of developing the cards generates professional discussions between the commander and his battle staff, and this is a good way to get to the issues of fighting philosophy. Often, however, some battle staff members may be ill-prepared to tell the task force commander what they need. The air defense and engineer officers, for example, may be newly assigned second lieutenants who have had little training on the staff functions of their jobs. In this instance, the commander can ask more experienced officers in these branches to assist in preparing the cards. The air defense battery or battalion commander may provide assistance. The ultimate intent of preparing the cards is to make sure the commander will be able to give the staff complete guidance in a logical format, even when he is tired and has little planning time.

Prepare a commander's intent statement that subordinate commanders can easily understand. Many commander's intent statements are useless or even detrimental to the understanding of the subordinate commanders. Often it appears that the commander realizes he must say something but is not sure what he wants to say. Some commanders have ''canned'' statements: ''The intent of this operation is to seize Objective Blue and retain 60 percent of our combat power.'' A similar statement is issued for each plan. This is not particularly helpful, in that it causes no action to be taken, or is of little help when a company commander loses communication. In the worst case, the commander delivers a 30-minute intent statement that his staff hears for the first time during the task force operations order. Often the commander contradicts the plan as delivered by the staff, which causes confusion or a revamping of the plan during the briefing.

The content and purpose of a commander's intent statement are personal—closely related to his individual leadership style and the command climate within the unit. It is important for a commander to realize that a poorly conceived commander's intent can be detrimental to mission accomplishment and that a good statement cannot be delivered without serious consideration of the desired result. The staff should have the advantage of hearing the intent before they have completely developed a plan, certainly no later than the point at which the commander selects a course of action. Ideally, a tentative intent is provided along with the initial planning guidance.

See that the task force executive officer and S-3 work as a team. A commander should not assume that the XO and the S-3 have a clear idea of their own roles. These officers often work at cross purposes, or one of them, out of frustration or confusion, chooses not to participate at all. The frustration occurs when their roles and duties are poorly defined, and the power of personalities becomes the dominant factor in determining their status in the organization. This lack of understanding most often shows up during the planning process, but the roles of these officers, if left unaddressed, can become cloudy in other areas as well. The effect on the unit can be devastating: Essential areas of the task force go without supervision, work is duplicated, and tempers flare.

The solution to this problem is for the commander to provide specific guidance on the role each of these officers will play during operations. In all likelihood, the executive officer's support form contains only one or two lines that deal with tactical operations, and that is not enough to ensure a complementary effort at the NTC.

It is not my intent to recommend how the work should be divided or where the XO and S-3 should be located at specific times. Each commander must wrestle with these issues himself, keeping in mind the personalities involved. But it is essential that the commander clearly lay out what he expects, build cohesion between these officers, and tolerate no rivalry between them.

Know the status of all units during preparations for combat. More than one commander has been astonished to learn during an after-action review that his main effort company issued no operations order and was low on ammunition, or that a critical obstacle was not emplaced. He was not made aware of these problems before contact with the opposing force (OPFOR) because his staff did not know what was important to him.

The effectiveness of a unit during the execution of a mission can generally be predicted on the basis of its preparations for combat: Units that give simple, timely orders, that boresight and zero their weapons, and that execute troop-leading procedures with some precision are more likely to fight

well. Additionally, when good things happen, it is usually because of effective supervision, and the reporting and tracking of critical information is a key part of the supervisory process.

The commander must lay out for the staff his commander's critical information requirements (CCIRs)—items of information that he considers essential and wants the staff to gather, track, and report to him.

Again, a single list of items probably will not work, because the things that are important in the defense may not be as relevant in the offense. What is essential depends upon the individual commander, but the following items are clearly critical:

- Issuance of orders by subordinate elements.
- Conduct of rehearsals by subordinate elements.
- Status of boresighting and zeroing.
- Status of obstacle development.
- Status of resupply or cache operations.
- Operational ready rate.

Allow the staff to execute the tactical decision-making process. Task force commanders often limit the honest attempts of their staffs to execute the tactical decision-making process. This usually occurs when a commander is unsure of the process, when he has little faith in it, or when he understands it but is not sure how to make it fit the available planning time. The staff, quickly conforming to the commander's style, may go on to develop plans that are unrealistic or hastily conceived.

Whether one believes in the doctrinal tactical decision-making process or not, plans that are developed without the staff's participation in a logical process will be flawed. When the commander becomes the driving force and the primary participant—using the "Let me tell you what we're going to do" style of orders development—he often fails to see the broader view of the plan, and the staff members are uncertain about the details, or reluctant to provide input.

This is not to say that it is wrong for the commander to direct a course of action when time is short. This method involves a degree of risk, but in most cases the commander is the most tactically competent member of the unit. Even on the rare occasions when he does direct a course of action, the commander should still allow the staff to wargame and develop it in the usual manner. His job is to provide clear guidance that heads the staff in the right direction.

Ensuring that the commander plays the proper role in the staff planning process requires more effort than any of the tasks previously discussed:

First, he must become intimately involved in training the staff to his standard; he cannot leave this training to the XO or the S-3 alone. He must approve the staff's methodology, noting particularly which steps are to be shortened when time is running out. Left on their own, the staff members may decide to cut a step or a product on the basis of the effort it involves instead of its importance to the mission.

The commander must set the standard for the procedural steps to be cut, for the way information is presented, and for the desired end product. Since he will not have an opportunity at the NTC to review orders before they are issued, he should read the products the staff has prepared at home station and decide whether they are useable or not. Is the information presented in a format he is comfortable with? Charts, overlays, and other written products should be standardized to improve comprehension when time is short and everyone is tired.

All of this requires time and considerable interaction with the staff in a training environment. During home-station training, the commander must be a player, not just a coach. If he gets closely involved in the staff process during the development of SOPs and staff training at home, he may be able to avoid getting bogged down in it at the NTC. The end result should be a workable SOP for producing orders in a limited time. (Four hours from receipt to issue is a tough, but attainable, standard.) The SOP should be one the commander has approved, understands, and supports by playing his role and demanding compliance.

In addition, the commander should spend some time with the secondary staff members. At the NTC, the commander and staff will be in an AAR during a significant portion of the planning process. Will the S-3 Air, the battlefield information control center, and the fire support NCO be able to maintain operations in his absence? If they don't, three or four hours will be wasted. There is no reason they cannot produce sound orders, given good guidance and home-station training. But they must know the commander's standards to the same degree the primary staff knows them.

Base plans on the enemy. Too many commanders are uncomfortable with the intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) and weak on the OPFOR's tactics and organization. This is extremely detrimental at task force level, because the S-2 is often relatively inexperienced. The IPB forms the base of any meaningful planning process and, if it is done badly or not at all, the plan will be built on a shaky foundation.

For this reason, a commander at task force level must be more familiar with the IPB process and the OPFOR than the commanders at higher levels. Often he must make sure the S-2 focuses on how to proceed with an enemy course of action the commander wants developed. At the very least, the commander must know enough about the IPB and the OPFOR to recognize a highly unlikely or non-doctrinal enemy course of action the S-2 may present. On many occasions at the NTC, a task force plan has been developed to meet the threat of an OPFOR course of action that neither the NTC OPFOR nor any army with similar characteristics would ever choose. The commanders in these cases were not knowledgeable enough of the OPFOR to recognize the problem.

The commander should demand that the S-2 produce a situational template before issuing his initial planning guidance to the staff and an event template for use during wargaming. If these two products are not available at these important points in the process, the plan cannot be developed properly.

Walk around and see the battlefield. During the preparation period, many commanders spend their time in the tactical operations center (TOC) revising poorly conceived plans instead of visiting their subordinate units. A commander can learn more in two minutes from chatting with a track com-

A unit's performance at the NTC often reflects the commander's ability to focus the efforts of his staff.

mander or a rifle squad leader than he can from two hours of wearisome activity in the TOC.

Getting out to see the troops is a basic leadership responsibility that is often neglected. The cause of this neglect is not apathy or ignorance but the commander's tendency to get so involved in the process that he cannot stand back and see the broader view.

In addition to failing to get out and see the troops during preparation periods, commanders also do a poor job of seeing the battlefield during execution. Although most commanders are well aware of the importance of seeing the critical point of action, some of them do not devote enough effort to making it happen. Operating under inflexible tenets such as "I always move with the main effort" will cause a commander to miss the action at the NTC. His positioning for battle must be based on the analysis of METT-T (mission, enemy, terrain, troops, and time), and he must remain flexible.

Taken as a whole, the preparatory steps discussed here are intended to do three simple things:

- Allow the commander to be consistent and predictable when dealing with the task force staff in a tactical environment. (The NTC is not the place for the staff to try to figure out how the commander likes to operate.)
- Increase the likelihood that the task force will produce doctrinally sound plans that are complete, understandable, and timely.
- Improve the commander's ability to function under stress by making the routine things routine and reducing the probability that the staff will surprise him, or be surprised itself.

If a task force commander can set aside only a small amount of his total effort and devote it to preparing himself for the NTC, this effort will greatly improve the performance of the entire task force.

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